

Introducing Young Miss Kewpie Doll

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Indianapolis the Home of Twinkle toes and Pinkies, as Developed by a Statuary Company on South Side
By Beatrice Sherman

“This way to get your Kewpie doll! Throw this ring over this cane and win this great big Kewpie doll! Too bad, mister, but try your luck again! Faint heart never won fair Kewpie! O _____h! This way to get your Kewpie doll! Throw this ring, etc.—” till the lights go out all over the fair and last weary fair spectator drags himself, and his balloons, and whips, and booklets, and Kewpie dolls to the street car and home.

All over Indiana the blatant and hardy perennial, the fair, is blossoming again – the state fair, the church fair, they are all here once more, and as a consequence the rush in the Kewpie business has set in. For not a fair is complete without its delegation of Kewpie folks – the tiny Kewpie that accompanies the box of candy, the huge, heroic Kewpie that is “raffled off” and is worth seven times its weight in dimes, and Kewpies of all sizes and styles that grace the wheels of fortune, and the Chinese gambling booths. No sooner does a fair start up in business until the exploiter of the Kewpie doll appears upon the scene with his flock of enticing Kewpie children.

But here’s some Kewpie scandal. Those naughty dolls were practically barred from the Indiana State Fair this year. Not for being naughty, not for lack of clothes, not for making eyes – but because they were terribly involved in the gambling business. No game of chance was complete without its generous quota of Kewpies, and so when State Fair authorities decided that no concession would be granted to anyone promoting gambling of any sort, the ban shut down hundreds of Kewpie kids from participation in the biggest fair in Indiana. There were a few lonely members of the tribe to be seen in booths where they were respectably offered for sale, but there’s no thrill to buying a Kewpie. In fact, some people are ashamed to do it. But to win a Kewpie by a lucky throw or a happy chance is quite a different and far pleasanter affair.

But though Kewpies languished in loneliness at our fair, from all reports the immodest dollies are still finding favor at every other kind of a fair in the state. They are patron saints of Broad Ripple and Riverside, and everybody has one. The question is – where do they all come from?

The answer, or part of it, is – The Indianapolis Statuary Company, a Kewpie factory on the corner of South Illinois and McCarty streets. The firm is made up of four Italians, Dante Gaspari, Enrico Vittori, Olinto Mariana, and Vincenzo Guerrini. Mr. Gaspari, who acts as a manager for the company, says, in explanation of the firm name, that it was impossible to include all four names in the sign for their factory, and as we all want to be free and equal, we didn’t choose any one name, but just called ourselves “The Indianapolis Statuary Company.”

Their business has had an interesting history. They have been in their present new building since last February and before that in a shop on Madison Avenue for a number of years. Some fifteen years ago the business covered a wider field than at present. “That was so long ago,” said Mr. Gaspari, “that I can hardly remember what all we did do. But we used to make images for churches – virgins and saints – but we didn’t have very many different pieces, so most churches would order from the big houses in Chicago, and our business wasn’t good. You have to have a wide line to get the church people.

“No, we haven’t any of our old pieces left. We did have a few holy images stored in the shed, but they’re not there anymore. The boys, I guess, got them. But, anyway, that kind of goods you got to keep polishing up and dusting all the time, or it’s no good.

“Then we used to make a lot of busts and casts for schools. But they don’t want them anymore. Guess they don’t use them. Nowadays we specialize – that’s the American way – on Kewpie dolls.”

All of the different things that were formerly made – virgins and saints, Ceasars and Dantes, Indian heads and dancing girls – every one has given way before the fatal popularity of the Kewpie doll. And all four of the partners, aided and abetted by eight or ten workmen, devote their time and energy to supplying the demand for Kewpies.



Painting Eyes and Finishing the Limbs

Seven different brands of Kewpies are put out. There are three different sizes of just plain naked Kewpies. Then there is a stylish young Kewpie person dressed in the sleeveless belted sweater that is so good this season. She wears a ribbon around her head to match her sweater and it is surmounted by an effulgent plaster paris red rose in the middle of her forehead. The costume idea is carried out still further in three other members of the family who wear abbreviated bathing suits. All except one of the seven different types was modeled by Vittori, and all of them have the bulgingly well-fed middle and oddly pointed head that distinguishes the Kewpie clan.

The whole process of making the doll, from plaster paris to finished Kewpie, is worked out in the little south side shop. In a basement room, powder thick with white dust, the plaster casts are made. Two well-greased gelatine molds that look like halves of a large rubber doll are fitted together and filled with the plaster of paris solution. One of the workers passes down the long bench pouring the plaster in and then he makes a second trip back and pours it all out. This looks like a beautiful game of time-killing, but it gets results. Part of the plaster sticks to the mold, and the extra portion is poured out. Four times the molds are filled through the opening left in the pedestal at the bottom, and each time a layer of the plaster sticks. After the final filling, the pedestal is made solid, the Kewpies dry for an hour, and then they are taken out of the molds and scraped down till they show an unblemished complexion.

The men who work in this part of the shop are mostly Italians. They lead a happy-go-lucky life, and work when they feel like it and quit when the spirit moves them.

"We don't care when they work," said Mr. Gaspari. "We don't pay no attention to them. They work by piece work, and if they want to, they can make a lot, but if they don't want to work, it don't matter. That boy there is a good worker, but you can't ever tell when he'll stop. The other day he stopped work in the middle of the morning and went off to Evansville for pretty near a week. But he worked fine when he got back."

There is no talk of union hours among these men. Four hours or fourteen is the length of their day, just as they happen to decide. And the four partners never bother them, unless at some time when the stock gets low, and then they urge the carefree Kewpie makers to stick to their jobs and speed up.

After the finished dolls have dried about twenty-four hours, they are dipped in a pink enamel, and given another day to dry. The arms are made separately and the sight of a long line of pink dimpled arms, neatly hung on a long rope to dry seems like a sort of distorted Christmas eve picture.

The last thing to be done is the painting. As soon as the dolls are dry they are given that soft red glow of health that shows itself in the ruddy color of feet, dimpled knees and cheeks. This aura of pinky health is given by means of a most up-to-date contrivance – an air brush – which uses compressed air to blow the paint on in a tiny spray. As the little nozzle of the blow-pipe arrangement is focused on each doll, she flushes pinker and pinker, and when the proper intensity has been reached, she is set aside, and the next sister is pinked up.

Marianl or Vittori then paints a red heart on each sentimental dolly, blues her eyes, gives her a lovelock of brown hair, a pair of cherry lips, and last of all paints in the black pupils of her eyes, coquettish, innocent, or blankly surprised. If she wears any garments, they are duly colored, and she is then finished up by receiving a pair of arms.

Huge families of Kewpies, from twenty-five to fifty, as packed into barrels, padded with paper, and started on their travels all over the country. The South Illinois Street shop sends its Kewpie children to all parts of Indiana, to all the states in the Mississippi Valley, and some even as far as California. From twelve to fifteen hundred must be made every day to supply the calls for Kewpies.

Mr. Gaspari and his fellow-workers have done other kinds of work in the past, work of a more exacting nature. Mr. Gaspari helped in the casting of the sculptured work in the Circle Theatre, and assisted in the execution of the eagle over the proscenium arch designed by Sangernebo. He has often worked with Myra Richards, and enjoys telling of her careful direction of the work on the fountain at the Fletcher estate. He went into the Kewpie business for purely commercial reasons; there was money in Kewpie, but now there is a good deal of competition – with an expressive shoulder-shrug – its dull always making the same thing, and who knows – perhaps he will not spend all his life making Kewpie dolls. They are good – but it is fine to change one's life work.

¹ books.google.com › books, [TOPICS – Volumes 1-2](https://books.google.com/books?id=CploAQAAMAAJ&pg=RA11-PA9&dq=TOPICS+Kewpie&hl=en&newbks=1&newbks_redir=1&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewip-8SB4uzuAhXCGsOKHWjpbIUQ6AEwAHoECAIQAg), Page 9 1920 (https://books.google.com/books?id=CploAQAAMAAJ&pg=RA11-PA9&dq=TOPICS+Kewpie&hl=en&newbks=1&newbks_redir=1&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewip-8SB4uzuAhXCGsOKHWjpbIUQ6AEwAHoECAIQAg)